QUANTA HELPLINE   Dilwyn Jones

Members wishing to submit helpline requests via email can use the email address helpline@quanta.org.uk or if you prefer to use traditional post, please send the helpline request to me via the address printed inside the front cover of the newsletter.

Obviously, we cannot guarantee to answer every query we receive, but we will do our best! Where we have been unable to answer the queries, we may print the help request as an open request in the newsletter to ask if any of the readers can come up with a solution. And, of course, if readers feel that they have a better solution than we came up with, or would like to correct any errors we make, please write to us!

Q. Many years ago I had a QL which I enjoyed using at the time, but eventually moved on to other computer systems. I still have that QL and in a fit of nostalgia (or was that boredom?) recently I dug it out of my attic where it had been stored for over a decade. Upon plugging it in, I was delighted to find it still worked, and amazingly several of the microdrive tapes still worked too. I spent a weekend rediscovering my QL, even though I'd forgotten 99% of what I once knew about the computer. Do you have any suggestions for reading material which would help me get back up to speed on the QL – it makes a refreshing change from the computers I use at work.

A. This query I got recently from a non-member seems to be getting more and more common. It suggests that there are quite a few users out there who find that returning to using a QL is surprisingly common. I also get such requests from retro-computing enthusiasts for whom a QL is one of many vintage computers in their collections, and even the odd new user who has acquired a second-hand QL. I would have hoped that someone has ideas on how to reach these sorts of new and returning users who may otherwise exist in isolation, not knowing that there is still a fairly small yet active community of QL users. Our Editor is one such person who has returned to using a QL after several years, after all.

So I'll start by suggesting our Editor's work. It seems quite natural that as he is a fairly recent returnee to the QL scene, he might want to share his experiences with other such QL users.

So a first port of call might be his website, where he has a section called "I Want 2 Learn". The website is at http://www.theql.co.uk/ and the "I Want 2 Learn" section is reached by clicking on the link on the right , below the, errr, colourful heading (helpfully the link is also called "I Want 2 Learn" !)

Referring back to the last issue of Quanta magazine, on page 43, Lee has also released an eBook for those who are new to or returning to the QL. Under the heading "A New Book In Town" he describes his book called "Back 2 the QL" which is available free on iTunes for reading on an iPad. Download it free from http://itunes.apple.com/us/book/back-2-the-ql/id535174158?ls=1 or search for 'Back 2 The QL'

Websites like this show just how useful modern technology can be for sharing information about retro-computers like the QL. It is hardly surprising that most of the modern sources of QL information come from websites.

Rich Mellor at RWAP Software operates a wonderful site called the QL Wiki. As the name implies, this site is a 'wiki' or a type of online encyclopedia which anyone can update to amend or supplement the extensive information already there. You need to

register to be able to edit it (stops spammers playing havoc with the site) but anyone can read the pages. The QL Wiki includes extensive information on books, CD-ROMs, QL systems, add-ons, software and so on. It is not purely a beginner's guide to the QL but whether you need to find information about books or software, or identify an old QL interface through pictures, it is a great help. And as your experience grows if you acquire something for the QL which is not already described there you can register to be able to add to the information. The QL Wiki website is at http://www.rwapadventures.com/ql_wiki/

Having familiarised yourself with what types of add-ons, books and software are available, you will next want to know where you can get these from. Modern auction sites like eBay (www.ebay.co.uk) and SellMyRetro (www.sellmyretro.com) are a great source of second-hand products for the QL, such as disk and memory add-ons. Most auction sites like these will let you buy stuff using a credit or debit card, or the PayPal payment system if you have signed up to that. Be prepared with the larger auction sites to spend some time searching and comparing products. Some have facilities for you to register an interest in certain products and will send you an email when an item they think is suitable becomes available. Prices vary quite a lot, since you have to 'bid' for these and obviously the highest bidder usually gets to buy the item. Sometimes, you may find that you can either bid for an item or buy it at a fixed price.

My website has a page called 'Returning To The QL' designed to help get "returnees" going. It consists of a series of frequently asked questions and answers (FAQs) together with a set of links to useful pages elsewhere on my website. http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/backtoql/backtoql.html

Although some of the material on my Documentation pages can be heavy going for someone new or returning to the QL, if you are prepared to search through the various sections you will be able to find many useful books and articles there, including a copy of the QL User Guide if you have no original Sinclair manual for your QL. The manual can be downloaded or read online. There's also a whole section devoted to eBooks, designed to be used with eBook readers such as Amazon Kindles. My QL Documentation pages can be found at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/docs/index.html

If you are new to the QL scene and would like to find general and background information about the QL, try my 'About The QL' pages at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/aboutql/aboutql.html . You can find a lot of the history of the QL computer both here and also on Chris Owen's Planet Sinclair site at http://www.nvg.ntnu.no/sinclair/ . Planet Sinclair is not just about the QL – although it has a section dedicated to the QL - it contains a lot of information on many Sinclair products.

QL Today magazine has recently been publishing a series of 'Glossary' articles, which seek to explain what certain abbreviations and acronyms mean. When you haven't used a QL for some years, running into an abbreviation like SGC can be intimidating when you don't know what they mean. SGC stands for Super Gold Card, by the way, a QL add-on board which adds a floppy disk interface, up to 4MB of memory, Toolkit 2 software and a faster processor which greatly increases the speed of a standard QL. If you have missed these articles, you can catch up with the Glossary articles via my website at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/docs/glossary/index.html . If you would like to subscribe to QL Today magazine, you can find information about the magazine via its website at http://www.qltoday.com/ . QL Today advertises in Quanta magazine regularly.

QL Today Editor, Geoff Wicks, is a former QL software publisher and now operates a website with plenty of help and advice plus several programs you can download free of charge. http://www.gwicks.net/justwords.html is the address of the website. On the Help/Advice page you can find excellent articles and advice on programming the new higher colour QL compatible systems, user friendly programming, transferring files and so on.

Having mentioned websites and transferring files reminds me that one of the problems new users often run into is that of transferring files between different computers. In this internet age, many of us have PCs running Windows, Apple Macs and Linux systems and it can be quite a challenge at first working out how to copy and move files between these computers and a QL. Software downloaded from QL-related websites is usually in 'Zip' file format, for example, so you will need to know how to get these files from a PC to a QL perhaps, where to get hold of copies of the Zip and Unzip programs for a QL and how to use them. There is an introductory article on my website which discusses how best to use the Unzip and related programs for transferring files from one computer to another. Have a look at the article at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/pcqlxfer/index.html . A second method of transferring files between computers is to use a serial cable link if the computers concerned have these – try the article about this at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/serial/serial.html

If you would like to contact other QL users worldwide, there are two UK-based forums. One operates via email – someone sends an email to the list and it is copied to all subscribers. It's called the QL-Users list and you can find information about it from Bruce Nicholls's website at http://lists.q-v-d.com/listinfo.cgi/ql-users-q-v-d.com . A second forum, called simply QL Forum, operates more like a traditional computer forum – have a look at www.qlforum.co.uk . In both cases, if you need help, just ask on these forums (you have to subscribe to be able to join, subscription to both is free). There's always plenty of experienced members who can answer pretty well anything between them.

Many of these websites I have mentioned contain links to other QL-related websites. Some have free QL software to download. My website contains a link to many such QL-related websites – have a look at http://www.dilwyn.me.uk/gen/qlnet/qlnet.html .

While having a list of some useful sources of information is one thing, finding specialist material can be tricky. This is where a little dedicated QL search engine comes in. This is at the top of the home page of my QL website at www.dilwyn.me.uk .It is optimised to find results related to QL systems.